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Generation Z Goes to College

Corey Seemiller and Meghan Grace
San Francisco, California: Jossey-Bass

Reviewed by Alison A. Spencer

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Generation Z Goes To College (2016) by Corey Seemiller and Meghan Grace is a thorough and fascinating exploration of the characteristics and needs of the most recent generation to reach college age. Generation Z is comprised of those born from approximately 1995 to 2010, making the oldest of this group about twenty-one years old at the time this book was written. This means that this book, and the large study of the same name which it describes, is one of the first to look at Generation

Z and address what the needs of this group may look like in the context of higher education. Seemiller and Grace are both practitioners in the field of higher education who, after noting a lack of research in this area, chose to start the conversation through some initial research. While no perfect answer is presented to the complex question of defining the generation and its needs, the book concludes that Generation Z as a whole is very different from previous generations, with different needs and interests that student affairs professionals should take note of and adjust their practices accordingly. The book also provides some excellent strategies for working with these students, and gives specific suggestions for approaches and programming that may be meaningful to this unique group.

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Overall, the book is organized simply and well. The preface describes not only the authors' rationale for the need for the study and subsequent book, but also the perspectives of each author on Generation Z from the point of view of their respective generations. Seemiller, of Generation X, explains both the great and challenging things about working with this group. Grace is a Millennial who describes the striking similarities and differences she finds between herself and the students she serves, who are relatively close to her in age. The Introduction then provides an overview of the Generation Z Goes to College study, a multi-institution effort led by Seemiller and Grace in 2014 to survey over 1100 Generation Z students on a variety of topics. This study formed the basis for this book, but the authors also supplemented the study with outside research to provide a more rounded-out picture of this generation. The description of the study is thorough and lays a strong foundation for the book's remaining chapters, which describe the findings of the study and make suggestions about their applicability.

Chapter 1 provides a general look at Generation Z in terms of their relationship to previous generations and their demographics, key traits, and motivations. Chapter 2 dives into the beliefs and perspectives of these students, particularly as relates to current affairs, religion, and politics. Their preferred forms of technology and communication are explored in Chapters 3 and 4. Chapter 5 portrays the way Generation Z students build and maintain relationships, while Chapter 6 breaks down issues which interest or concern them. This connects to Chapter 7, which explains the ways in which these students engage with, and sometimes change, the world around them. Chapter 8 provides interesting insight into how Generation Z defines, perceives, and performs leadership. Chapter 9, a crucial chapter, addresses the way they learn, in terms of learning styles, resources, environments, and discusses how these factors can affect major decisions about college. Finally, Chapter 10, brings together all the findings from the study and other sources to present clear, concrete suggestions for how to work with Generation Z effectively in a college or university setting, including relational, operational, instructional, programmatic, developmental, and technological strategies.

Overall, this book presents a well-developed and supported argument. The timing of the study is excellent; the lack of research about this particular group in relation to higher education certainly needed to be addressed, particularly since the majority of students currently in

colleges and universities belong to this new generation. The developmental theories and measures used to develop the literature review and survey questions of the *Generation Z Goes to College* study, including Kolb's experiential learning model, Gardner's multiple intelligences, and the Life Orientation Test are widely known and respected in the field, and provide a sound basis for the study. From a methodological perspective, the study was well-developed, though not without its limitations. The sample size was respectably large, and the fact that it included students from fifteen institutional partners makes it more easily generalizable than if it only drew from the authors' institution. However, the actual sample size for individual questions was smaller than the listed 1100 plus, as not all participants addressed each question—no single question received more than 759 responses. Additionally, while the authors mention that "Generation Z is the most racially diverse generation to date" (Seemiller & Grace, 2016, p. 7), their sample skewed heavily white. This, along with the fact that all the participants were volunteers recruited solely through the authors' professional connections and that many types of institutions are not represented in the study, could indicate that the sample is not necessarily representative of Generation Z as a whole. However, by pulling in other research from various sources, including studies from other higher education institutions, national polling data, market research, and studies about adolescents, the authors adjust for some of the limitations of the study's reach. Both quantitative and qualitative questions were assessed, giving the data more depth and allowing for a more broad picture of these students and their perspectives than just quantitative data would have provided. Finally, the authors are careful to address the fact that this study only provides a general snapshot of a large and varied group of students, and that care should be taken not to overgeneralize these results. As mentioned several times through the book, the findings are merely a starting point for practitioners to start to understand and appreciate a new generation. It is still crucial for practitioners to consider each student's characteristics and needs individually and adjust the strategies they use in working with these students accordingly.

There is not space enough in a brief review to break down all of the interesting insights offered by *Generation Z Goes to College*. However, a few bear mentioning. First, it is important to consider the double-edged sword of social media. It is a hugely crucial set of tools that educators in this day and age cannot afford to ignore if they wish to stay relevant.

However, the findings in this study suggest that Generation Z views certain platforms, such as Twitter, as safe spaces away from the scrutiny and judgment of authority figures. It is important to use social media mindfully and effectively, while respecting students' space. Second, students of this generation view higher education as a worthwhile experience, but are also very concerned about the cost of education and whether or not it will adequately prepare them for the work-force. Due to this, they have very high and specific expectations for their college or university experiences, and want more experiential or problem-based learning that yields real-life experience and skills that employers want. Practitioners should consider this when designing curricular and co-curricular programming for Generation Z students, as this type of learning currently exists in the field, but is typically not available to all students. Finally, Generation Z students are passionate, hard-working, and want to change the world by addressing root-causes and not symptoms. They are somewhat unique in that, "instead of working in a job that they see as just a means to make a living and then volunteering on the weekends to give back to their community, Generation Z students will turn their community engagement experiences into paid work" (p. 145). They are also highly entrepreneurial, and if they cannot find the jobs that fit their needs, they may create their own. Understanding these needs and motivations is crucial to understanding this generation and what they are looking for after their college or university experiences.

While the topics in this book do not directly address a Christian worldview, it is important that Christian practitioners stay relevant and up-to-date on best practices in higher education in order to provide ethical and mindful service to their students. Additionally, there are several fascinating insights into this generation's view of spirituality and religion, as well as the issues they care about, that may prove useful to Christian practitioners in understanding and serving these students. It is a timely book, and certainly a worthwhile read for any student affairs professional.

Alison A. Spencer worked at Abilene Christian University in academic advising and program management for the Honors College. Most recently, she spent two years teaching in English in Japan.